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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine if the low reading achievement of a group of Creole-speaking first and second graders was caused by lack of comprehension (due to dialect interference) of their Standard English texts. The materials used were three stories in Creole and three stories in Standard English. Because they had never encountered dialect texts, these stories were taped and the children were asked questions orally, in order not to bias the results. The children were tested at three different levels of difficulty appropriate to their grade levels. No difference in total number of correct responses was found between the Creole and Standard English selections. This finding is consistent with the results of other studies done with both Black and Hawaiian children. An important finding relating to reading achievement was that the children as groups comprehended story content poorly, even at their expected grade level. Since listening comprehension should be far above reading comprehension, it was suggested that more emphasis be given to increasing general comprehension skills in both listening and reading. (Author)

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Technical Report #53

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The Kamehameha Early Education Program

The Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) is a research and development program of The Kamehameha Schools/Bernice P. Bishop Estate. The mission of KEEP is the development, demonstration, and dissemination of methods for improving the education of Hawaiian and Part-Hawaiian children. These activities are conducted at the Ka Na'i Pono Research and Demonstration School, and in public classrooms in cooperation with the State Department of Education. KEEP projects and activities involve many aspects of the educational process, including teacher training, curriculum development, and child motivation, language, and cognition. More detailed descriptions of KEEP's history and operations are presented in Technical Reports #1-4.

Technical Report #53

Hawaii Creole Speakers' Listening Comprehension Abilities in Standard English and Hawaii Creole

Kathryn H. Au Gisela E. Speidel

It has been hypothesized that children who are speakers of nonstandard dialects and who lack equal competence in Standard English will have difficulty in learning to read because of interference caused by the differences between the two languages (Goodman, 1965; Labov, 1969; Stewart, 1969). The vast majority of children who speak nonstandard dialects are asked to learn to read using materials written in Standard English (SE) under the supervision of teachers who give instructions in Standard English. The low acquisition of reading skills by a large number of nonstandard dialect children (Baratz and Shuy, 1969) makes the language interference hypothesis a highly tenable one. However, this general hypothesis must be tested in specific studies to determine whether interference actually occurs, and if so the level at which it occurs and the ways in which it adversely affects the child's learning to read.

The present study was designed to test the hypothesis that dialect speakers have difficulty in learning to read because they often do not understand the information in Standard English texts. This would happen because the texts invariably contain features which do not occur, or have a somewhat different meaning, in their dialect (Goodman, 1965).

Several studies of Black American students have addressed this question (Nolen, 1972; Marwit and Neumann, 1974). Nolen tested second and fourth grade black and white children of low socioeconomic background on materials written in Standard English and Black English. Subjects read the selections and then

wrote answers to questions. At the second grade level, none of the comparisons between performance of black and white students attained significance. However, white students in the fourth grade outscored blacks on both the two dialect reading passages and on the Standard English passage. Of most interest, perhaps, was the finding that the ability of both black and white subjects to answer questions was not affected by the dialect in which the passage was written. Marwit and Neumann (1974) similarly found that their first and second grade black students comprehended standard and nonstandard English reading material equally well. Black students generally obtained lower scores than the white students, with the important exception of the black students' performance in the Standard English condition with a white examiner, when their scores did not differ from the white students.

A complication in these studies is that they required the students to read the stories. Since these students had received reading instruction only in Standard English, and not in their own dialect, it might be argued that their comprehension of dialect materials was depressed due to their unfamiliarity with the dialect reading stimuli and that these studies, therefore, do not assess the black students' actual ability to comprehend dialect materials.

However, there is evidence to suggest that dialect speaking children comprehend orally presented material equally well in Standard English and in dialect. Peisach (1965) conducted a study to find out how successfully information was communicated between teachers and children of different races and socioeconomic status, including disadvantaged black students. A cloze procedure was used, in which students supplied the missing words in sentences serving as examples of the speech of different social groups. Surprisingly, Peisach found almost no differences between the performance of black and white children at both the first and fifth grade levels.

Weener (1969) collected language samples from middle class white and lower class black adults and used these samples as stimulus materials. The samples were read as word lists to groups of first grade black students and white students. The black children did not recall significantly more from the lists read to them by adults in their own dialect than from lists read by adults in a different dialect, a finding leading Weener to conclude that at least some dialect speaking children learn to understand Standard English at a very young age.

The present investigation examined the comprehension abilities of a group of Hawaii Creole speaking students. Hawaii Creole is a nonstandard form of English spoken by a large part of the population in the Hawaiian Islands (see Technical Report #29). The difficulty noted above with the Nolen (1972) and the Marwit and Neumann (1974) studies in having the students read dialect texts was eliminated by presenting the Standard English and Hawaii Creole stories orally to the students, as well by asking the comprehension questions orally.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were the 24 second grade and 28 first grade KEEP students. The vast majority of these children were part-Hawaiian and native speakers of Hawaii Creole. Seventy-five percent came from lower income families. (For a more complete description of the characteristics of these students, see Technical Report #13.)

Materials

Selections were taken from kits 1-B and 1-C in the SRA Reading Laboratory series (Parker, 1961, 1963). These kits contain stories graded according to level of difficulty, and designed to be read by children independently. The

materials are widely used in the public schools in Hawaii.

Pairs of stories at different levels of difficulty were chosen and matched in so far as possible for content and interest. The stories selected for use with the second graders were at the 1.4 (first grade, fourth month), 2.0, 3.0, and 3.5 reading levels. Those to be used with the first graders were at the 1.4, 1.7, 2.0, and 2.6 reading levels. Stories in the pairs were assigned at random to either set A or set B.

Five questions were constructed for each story. To facilitate interrater reliability in scoring, the questions dealt with factual material. Only questions that dealt with important features of the story were asked. A list of acceptable answers and scoring criteria was prepared for the raters.

Dialect translations of all stories and questions were prepared by a linguist who was a native speaker of Hawaii Creole.[1] The translated stories and questions were examined to make certain that no changes in content had inadvertantly been made. In addition, word counts of both versions of each story were taken and compared. Translations of all stories were no more than 18 words longer or shorter than the originals. Finally, tape recordings were made of the linguist's reading of both versions of each story.

Procedure

Subjects were tested twice, with a week's interval between sessions. On one occasion they heard four Standard English stories, on the other a different set of four stories in Hawaii Creole.

There were four possible orders in which the stories could be heard, with each subject participating in both SE and HC conditions. These orders are listed below:

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[1]Many thanks to Carol Odo for her assistance with this project.

	First Session	Second Session
Order 1	HC Set A	SE Set B
Order 2	HC Set B	SE Set A
Order 3	SE Set A	HC Set B
Order 4	SE Set B	HC Set A

The children within each grade level were randomly assigned to one of these four orders.

Two female experimenters, fluent both in Standard English and in Hawaii Creole, conducted the testing sessions: one experimenter worked with each grade level. During the Hawaii Creole reading sessions the instructions and prompts, as well as any other comments made to the child were given in dialect.

Subjects were tested individually in an experimental room. At the beginning of the Standard English session, the experimenter read the following instructions: "Today I'm going to let you hear some stories. I'm going to play them for you on this tape recorder. Your job is going to be to listen carefully, because after the story is over, I'm going to ask you some questions, and make a tape recording of your answers. I'll have a surprise for you when we're all finished." For both groups of children the first story, which was at the 1.4 reading level, served as a sample and warm up. They then listened to the other three stories selected for their grade. Test stories were always played in the same order, beginning with the story at the lowest reading level, and continuing on to stories of increasing difficulty.

After the sample story and after each test story, the experimenter stopped the tape recorder and asked the child the questions that had been prepared for that story. Three questions were asked following the sample, five questions following each of the test stories. All responses made by

the children were taped with a Sony TC-110A recorder.

The children were given one minute in which to begin responding to the question. If the child gave an incomplete or vague answer, the experimenter said, "Can you tell me more?" and if no response was made to two consecutive questions, the experimenter prompted the child by saying, "See if you can remember what happened in the story so you can answer this next question." If any child did not respond to, or did not answer correctly, any of the five questions for a single test story, the testing session was discontinued. For the majority of children, each session took approximately 20 minutes.

Scoring of Responses

The answers were scored independently by two raters. Their scoring reliability was 98% for the two grades combined. One point was given for a correct response to each question, zero for an incorrect response, with no partial credits. The children were not penalized for responding in a language code different from that of the story.

Results

Data for the two classes are summarized in Table 1. The means and standard deviations for each class in both language codes are virtually identical.

Table 1

Mean Number of Correct Responses to All Stories

	First Grade (n=28)		Second Grade (n=24)	
	MC	SE	MC	SE
$\bar{X}$	8.03	8.07	8.70	8.62
SD	3.97	3.67	3.66	3.33

The data were evaluated using an analysis of variance for repeated measures. In the first grade class there was no significant effect for language alone (F=0.77, df=1/24) or for order (F=3.00, df=3/24). However, there was a significant interaction for order by language (F=4.67, df=3/24, $p < .05$). Unfortunately, because set of stories (A or B) and order of language (HC or SE first) are confounded in the design of this study, it is not possible to perform any further analysis to evaluate the separate effects of these variables.

The analysis of variance performed on the second grade data showed similar results, in that no significant effects were found for either language (F=0.02, df=1/20) or order (F=2.34, df=3/20). However, in this case, the interaction between the two also was not significant (F=2.04, df=3/20).

The children's scores on the story closest to their grade level were then examined to determine degree of comprehension on that material. Because the test was administered near the end of the school year, the appropriate level for the first graders was 2.0, and for the second graders 3.0. At that level of difficulty almost total literal comprehension is expected, particularly since the children did not have to read the stories themselves. The table below shows the results of this analysis.

Table 2

Mean Number of Correct Responses at Appropriate Grade Level

	First Grade (n=28)	Second Grade (n=24)
	2.0 Reading Level	3.0 Reading Level
$\bar{X}$	2.86	3.58
SD	1.66	1.43

(Five possible correct responses)

Neither class scored well, considering the high level of competence that should have been shown on this material. The results suggest that the first graders comprehend less than 60% of the story content, and the second graders about 70%, based on their responses to the questions.

Discussion

Contrary to expectations, the Hawaii Creole speaking students did not show better comprehension of the dialect stories than of the Standard English stories; they did not answer correctly significantly more questions based on the Creole stories. In fact, the mean number of answers correct in Standard English and in Creole were almost identical for both the first and second grade students.

These results are supported by Ciborowski and Choy (1974), who conducted a study in which half of the fifth grade subjects had been judged to be competent in Hawaii Creole only, and half to be competent in Standard English only. All of the children were from middle class families. The subjects were presented with two stories, both either in Hawaii Creole or Standard English, and later were asked to recall eight items embedded in the stories. Dialect speakers did recall more from the dialect stories than from the Standard English stories (7.2 items as opposed to 6.3 items). However, the investigators' main conclusion was that the Creole speakers were actually bidialectal, because they recalled more items from the Standard English stories than the Standard English speakers did from the dialect stories.

The present findings are also consistent with the conclusions of similar investigations of Black American children described earlier (Nolen, 1972; Marwit and Neumann, 1974), which showed that the children's comprehension of Standard English and Black English reading materials was approximately the same. However, the results of these studies were difficult to interpret

because the subjects were requested to read dialect materials, a task for which they had no previous training or practice, while they had had much experience in reading Standard English materials. To avoid this difficulty, materials were presented orally in the present study. However, the subjects still failed to show superior comprehension of stories presented in their primary speech code since the mean number of correct responses to questions based on dialect and Standard English stories was practically identical.

Although the listening comprehension of the children in both grades was approximately the same in the two language codes, the level of comprehension was not high. Because the children did not read the stories but listened to them on tape, they should have demonstrated almost 100% comprehension of stories at the 2.0 and 3.0 levels respectively. In actuality, first graders were judged to comprehend less than 60% and second graders about 70% of the story content at their appropriate grade levels.

Because these subjects were drawn mainly from a low-income population, the low overall level of listening comprehension may be the result of variables related to low SES, rather than the result of dialect alone. Ciborowski and Choy's (1974) results support this interpretation, since their middle class Creole speaking subjects scored as high as their Standard English speaking subjects. Further comparisons with a low SES Standard English speaking group is needed to provide additional information bearing on this question.

Certain implications for reading instruction can be drawn from the findings of this study. One currently popular solution for the reading problems of black children is to instruct them with texts written in their dialect (Baratz and Shuy, 1969; Somervill, 1975). Although we do not know all the aspects of linguistic competence that are related to learning to read,

we do know that comprehension of story content is an important variable. The present findings thus do not provide support for the use of such dialect readers--at least not for the Hawaii Creole speaking child.

The results do suggest that more emphasis should be placed in developing the children's general comprehension skills in both listening and reading. The relatively poor performance of both the first and second grade classes show that systematic instruction in comprehension is required at the beginning levels to facilitate reading acquisition. The ways in which comprehension can be increased are an important subject for future research.

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